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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000859

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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT

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SUBJECT: In move that could have big impact, accord between radical JVP and president's party seems imminent

Refs: Colombo 851, and previous

(U) Classified by Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons: 1.5 (B, D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: The radical JVP and President Kumaratunga's party seem set to ink a MOU very soon. Due to differences, the two sides have reportedly agreed to be vague on peace process issues. If the accord is indeed concluded, it could impact the peace process, with Tamils complaining that it is effectively an alliance of Sinhalese chauvinists. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) CLOSING IN ON AN ACCORD: The radical Janantha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party and President Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) seem very close to inking a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) formally allying the parties. (Note: The SLFP is the key constituent element of the Opposition People's Alliance, "PA," political grouping, which includes various parties and is led by the president. The PA had a formal alliance with the JVP in September 2001 that later lapsed. The SLFP is taking the lead with the accord now because several small leftist parties in the PA no longer want to work with the JVP. End Note.) It is unclear exactly as to when the accord might be signed, but some contacts have told us that it could happen as early as next week or by mid-June. Jeyaraj Fernandopoulle, a PA/SLFP MP, told us that he thought it would be signed "sooner rather than later." Fernandopoulle said Kumaratunga is still reviewing the draft MOU, which was prepared by SLFP and JVP teams, who have been negotiating its terms for months (see Reftels). He had heard the president was "pleased" with the draft MOU and planned to have it approved by the SLFP's governing committee soon. After that, it would become official when signed by the SLFP and JVP party secretaries.

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3. (C) BASICALLY AN ELECTORAL PACT: With respect to substance, the accord, from what we hear, is basically an electoral pact coupled with a statement of joint principles. (Note: Amazingly for Sri Lanka's notoriously porous political environment, a draft text of the accord has not leaked out as of yet.) Fernandopoulle told us that the draft was quite elaborate as to where each party would run its candidates for Parliament, so that they would unite their combined vote and not divide it. (Note: In the December 2001 national election, the PA and JVP received almost as many votes as the United National Party. They were not allied at the time and lost, and now feel that a pact will prevent a similar splitting of their vote.) When asked whether the apparently near-term announcement of the alliance signaled that the president might want to call new elections, Harim Peiris, the president's spokesman, said he did not think that she was of a mind to do so soon. That said, he thought she might in the future if she felt the GSL was growing increasingly unpopular.

4. (C) VAGUE ON PEACE PROCESS: Confirming press reports, contacts have told us that the MOU will probably be quite vague as to peace process issues. Peiris told us that the document would mention support for the process and for a negotiated settlement of the dispute in a general way. Noting the long-standing differences between the two sides, however, Fernandopoulle related that he understood the draft would barely mention the terms "devolution" and "federalism" as ways to solve the ethnic conflict. (Note: The president and the PA/SLFP are basically open to solutions involving devolution and federalism. It is only a slight overstatement to say that the JVP is violently opposed.) Fernandopoulle said the MOU would be more concrete regarding economic issues, with the two sides united in criticism of the GSL's reform plans.

15. (C) TAMIL CONCERNS: Tamils seem very worried about the potential pact. Gajendran Ponnambalam, a Tamil National Alliance MP, told us that he thought the proposed accord would not be good for the peace process because it represented an alliance of "Sinhalese chauvinists." (Note: The JVP is a chauvinist party without much doubt. Most SLFP MPs and the president are relatively moderate on peace process issues, though there is a minority in the party that makes anti-peace process, pro-Sinhalese statements.) When asked about the reaction of the Tamil Tigers to the possible SLFP/JVP pact, Ponnambalam said he did not think the group would react in an aggressive way. The Tigers, however, would make it clear that they were not happy.

16. (C) COMMENT: If the accord is indeed concluded, it will probably spark plenty of political reverberations. The most important impact would probably be the potentially negative reaction of the Tigers and other Tamils, who will consider the president's close links with the JVP a threat to the long-term viability of the peace process. Another probable impact will be that felt by the GSL, which only holds a slim majority in Parliament and may feel vulnerable to a newly combined opposition. END COMMENT.

17. (U) Minimize considered.

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